

Your Friend Forever, A. Lincoln: The Enduring Friendship Of Abraham Lincoln And Joshua Speed

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Review

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Strozier, Charles B. *Your Friend Forever, A. Lincoln: The Enduring Friendship of Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed.* Columbia University Press, \$35.00
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A Life Saving Friendship: Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed

In this interesting book, Charles B. Strozier, who is both an academic historian and a practicing psychotherapist, shares his thoughts about the important dynamics of the friendship between Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed, who became acquainted in 1837, when Lincoln first settled in Springfield, Illinois.

The most significant fact about the friendship, in Strozier's view, was that it saved Lincoln's life — beyond a doubt, and in terms that must be taken quite literally. Lincoln experienced two episodes of clinical depression in his early adulthood, the first in 1835 and the second in 1841. In both episodes, he was intermittently suicidal, and Strozier argues convincingly that Speed played a crucial role in helping Lincoln to regain his emotional equilibrium in the second episode.

The profundity of the distinction between what Strozier calls "garden-variety depression" and clinical depression is hammered home right away by the author, who, as a medical practitioner, explains that "clinical depression takes one into a dark hole where creativity languishes along with the self. Nothing hopeful can emerge from such an experience. It is toxic." Anyone who has experienced this state will recognize the truth of Strozier's description, and the challenge of emerging from this dark and bottomless hole was enormous in the days before the existence of the medications that are now miraculously available.

One of the emotional triggers for Lincoln in these early days was without a doubt early trauma regarding the death of certain loved ones, including his

mother, his sister, and, perhaps most of importantly of all, his young sweetheart Ann Rutledge. Lincoln's legendary love for this woman was dismissed for generations by scholars as a legend in the pejorative sense of that term, i.e., as a legend in the sense of a myth. In the past thirty years, however, careful scholarship by several historians has turned that conventional wisdom on its head, and it can no longer be doubted that Lincoln was ardently in love with Ann Rutledge, whose death drove him nearly insane.

Issues concerning Lincoln's love life were also integral to his second attack of clinical depression in 1841. Strozier tells the story of how "in his experience of a successful quest for love and intimacy indirectly through his friend Speed in early 1842, Lincoln found his emotional compass He was never again suicidal."

One of the salient points of this book is its vigorous argument against the recent notion that Lincoln might have been bisexual in light of the fact that he slept in the same bed with Speed . . . and with other men as well. Strozier argues against this idea in two ways. First, he contends that a huge cultural difference separates the norms of the early nineteenth century from contemporary practices in matters of masculine friendship as well as in various matters of sexuality. "It takes a leap of the imagination," he writes, to conceive of a time "when young men could be, indeed were assumed to be, close, bonded, and intimate, even sleeping together, *without* being sexual partners," but such, he argues, was the situation that was often the norm in young Lincoln's America. Second, he stresses the fact that in the frontier conditions in which Lincoln grew up, "there was never any measure of private space." Lincoln and his family lived in cramped log cabins where "everyone dressed — and undressed — in the common space." Bodily privacy in such surroundings was an afterthought at best — if that.

This is a useful, timely, and thought-provoking book for Lincoln scholars and for general readers. Strozier is to be commended for producing it.

Richard Striner is a professor of History at Washington College. He is the author of over ten books, several of which are devoted to Abraham Lincoln.